A MILITARY REFUSER IN ISRAEL SPEAKS



THE FINAL STRAW RADIO JAN 21, 2024 Yuval Dag, an Israeli anarchist member of Mesarvot recently imprisoned for publicly refusing conscription, talks about draft refusal, opposing the war on Palestinians and the occupation and undoing zionist ideology.

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Yuval Dag: My name is Yuval (he/him). I have refused military service this last year and spent two months in jail for it. It was before the war. Ever since, I'm doing activism regarding anti-militarism in Israel, and I've spent a lot [of time] in the West Bank in Masafer Yatta. That's mainly what I do now, as far as activism goes, and now of course [activism] against the war.

TFSR: Would you speak about the social and legal standing that military service has in Israel?

YD: So I think that the status of military service and essentially the militaristic dogma in Israel is one of the most differentiating things between the Israeli society and other supposedly Western countries. Socially, it has the biggest standing. Your group of friends is the group of people you served in the army with, and later it dictates what job you go into. At a younger age, where have you been in the military says a lot about you. Then legally, of course, it's mandatory for both men and women. I think that it's the tightest conscription in the world. Refusing military service means going to military jail. Although a lot of people managed to get exemptions. Right now, the amount of people who don't finish their mandatory service is 50%. But that includes Palestinians and ultra-Orthodox. Some Palestinians do need to enlist.

TFSR: I was reading your statement that you made on Facebook. You say in it that you grew up in a Zionist framework, but then managed to extract yourself from that thinking. Would you speak about the path you took out of Zionism? And what are some common hurdles that people face when doing similar things?

YD: To put it in context, I think it needs to be mentioned that Zionism runs so, so deep in the society and the personality of Israeli people. It's much more than ideology. It's an identity. And it's an identity that most people don't necessarily even realize is with them. One of the hardest things when trying to, let's say, convert Zionist people, is the inability of a Zionist to face the truth. A lot of people, when I speak to them about the occupation and the horrible things that happen, either it doesn't affect them, and they say, "Yeah, totally horrible," but then they manage to disconnect and still go to the army or something. Or a lot of people just say, "No way that this is happening, because the IDF is the most moral army in the world," just because it's the IDF, stuff like that. There is a deep, deep kind of protective shield between Zionists and the true reality. Therefore, I think that the Israeli propaganda machine is probably the most efficient in the history of nation-states.

Luckily for me, I can't really say why, but I had the ability to develop my

own critical thinking at some point. Late into my process, when I was kind of on the fence, even when I hear[d] pro-Palestinian arguments, (which aren't necessarily pro-Palestinian, but generally are just pro-humans and human rights or whatever), I still [would] become very defensive and I would say, "No, that's not the full picture. No, but Jews this, no but Jews that." We have a saying that 'everybody has a little Zionist in them,' even the ones who manage to leave this way. At some point, I encountered some explanation videos—it's called hasbara in Hebrew. It means explanation. It's something that the Israeli government puts money into, and what it is—it's propaganda abroad. That's what it is. So I encountered in this explanation video some guy fighting with some other guy. The other guy said stuff in the case of Palestinians, he said factually correct stuff, but it still managed to anger me. "How can you say this?" "We are the victims," and all that. I became uncomfortable with that. Why the hell am I getting uncomfortable with this? He's saying stuff that is correct.

I felt that I needed to dive deeper and re-examine things that I have been indoctrinated about. I just started diving down on social media into either Palestinian independent media or radical Israeli Jewish media. All of a sudden you see this crazy reality that exists 10, 20 kilometers from where you grew up. It's unbelievable at first. You ask yourself how does this stuff correlate with all of the things that I grew up on for 18, 19 years? Then you reach a breaking point, which if you're open enough like I was, you just snapped out of it. You realize that what's going on here is not the reality that they teach us, and you must resist. Or you reach this point, and you're not open to it enough, and then you just live your life on two different planes. I have friends, and I know a lot of people who, although they acknowledged the occupation, managed to finish military service while feeling guilty for it. But in the end, they will be a part of Israeli society, and they will probably go to the reserves. Once you reach this point of acknowledgment, you have these two ways to go, and I was lucky enough to go what I think is the right way.

TFSR: Would you speak about your relationship to anarchism and far-left politics and how has that relationship supported refusal?

YD: The anarchist framework actually, I think, is what allowed me to develop my stance on what's going on here. It's much easier to get into politics when it's far away from you and when it's grand and historical. So as every teenager does, I developed these certain morals and codes. Most far-leftists in Israel go the communist way, but I went the anarchist way. After developing all these anarchist ideas, I had to face the Israeli-Palestinian reality at some point, because my draft was coming up. I believe everybody should be free, everybody should be happy—does the army serve these things? So for me, anarchism was the gateway for anti-Zionism and re-

TFSR: That's awesome. Is there any book or thinker or person on the internet you were following whose thinking supported you through that?

YD: I didn't really read that many books. I think that one of the biggest actual social media accounts, the first one I was exposed to, that helped me through my change was Oren Ziv. He does write stuff in a magazine, but on his account he just publishes photos he shoots. He's a journalist. He doesn't write a lot about the photos when he posts them to Instagram. Just seeing this stuff, seeing the occupation super plainly on social media. You see photos that there are no two ways to interpret them. If you would show them to my dad, he would say, "That's not true," because there isn't another way to interpret it besides to deny it. That was one of the things that pushed me the most, just seeing stuff from every day on the ground.

TFSR: Especially given how socially fraught refusing military service seems to be, are there any frameworks that support those who refuse military service?

YD: The network that I'm a part of, and that was with me during my refusal, is Mesarvot. We are a network for refusers by refusers. On the one hand, we offer legal counseling during the process, and we offer a network for activism around anti-militaristic subjects but it's also a network of refusers, most of which are your age. So it's something very important, having some people that you know that support you during the process.

The other biggest network is called New Profile. We have this profile gradient here in Israel in the army. Your profile is like your health status, and the higher your profile the more exclusive units you can get into. So they're called New Profile, and they let you get is called Profile 21, which is the lowest profile which exempts you from military service. They help people to get that, and they are also very anti-militaristic and very political. There are also other networks. There is a refuser network called the Urfod, I think, which is a network of Druze military refusers. Because certain Druze, especially in the Galilee, also face mandatory conscription they also have their network. These are the three that at least I know of.

TFSR: You touched on this a little before in a previous answer, but since the escalation and violence since October 7th especially, what are some social and legal consequences for refusing military service? You mentioned that you spent about two months in jail. Is this something that is going to follow you for the rest of your life?

YD: It's hard to know at this point, but it may. For example, a current refuser who's in jail, his name is Tal. Usually, your jail sentence is divided into several shorter sentences that comprise how many days you spend in jail. The regular amount of days for your first sentencing is 10 days. Tal received 30 days on his first sentencing, which is something very, very unusual. Right now he is still in prison, and after he goes back, we'll see how much he will get again. We don't know yet. They are already much harder on him.

There are also a lot of anonymous reserve refusers. Some are being fined a payment, some are getting sent to jail. These are all things we'll see in the future how they will roll out, how they will be punished. We're speaking of the military justice system, if you can call it a justice system. It's completely different than, let's say, the regular Western justice system. Seeing how it works in the West Bank indicates it in the best way to know what it does. You can bring people without a lawyer, without a hearing, anything, after you've held them with no charges for 30 days, and then charge them with something they never did and never heard about. It's the military court system. It's different, and it's not subject to any outside rules. It has rules of its own.

TFSR: You mentioned doing anti-war, anti-occupation work now. What does that movement look like right now in Israel? And how is the state reacting?

YD: More and more people are starting to get more and more tired of the situation, at least in Israel. There are more and more radical demonstrations against the war. There were radical demonstrations to stop the war, to stop the siege, to stop the occupation, but they were few. Now, there are many more: in a few cities a few every week. There's also a very big one now that they're trying to organize. The smaller ones are getting beaten by the police. They're just squashed.

Of course, in Jerusalem, the police are super violent with these demonstrations. In Tel Aviv, they manage, although the police even beat them sometimes. Now they are organizing the biggest demonstration yet, or one of the biggest, and it doesn't get approval from the police. So we'll see how this rolls out. The state and the police obviously dislike it a lot, and they are showing extreme violence against these protests. Yeah, it makes sense that they don't want them. They see it as a betrayal.

TFSR: It's occurring to me that I don't exactly know what the relationship between the police and the military is. Is there a lot of collaboration between the police and the military, or are they sort of like legally distinct from each other?

YD: Speaking purely about what is internationally considered Israel, and excluding the West Bank because the situation there is totally different. I can't recall a time I remember when I saw the military acting inside Israel. There is this hybrid unit called Magav, which is an acronym for border police. They are kids [who] were supposed to be recruited for the IDF, but they were recruited for this unit, which is a hybrid between the police and the military, and they act both in the West Bank and Israel. They are essentially just regular patrol officers with M-16s, and they are actual goons and thugs, especially in the West Bank. They are one of the most terrible forces. They can operate here, inside internationally acknowledged Israel (what we call 48). Actually in my neighborhood, in a mixed Palestinian-Jewish neighborhood, since the beginning of the war, they have been patrolling in groups inside the neighborhood itself. I saw them many times just stopping and questioning Palestinians for no reason.

TFSR: I'm curious to know how the anti-war movement in Israel feels about the ICJ case brought by South Africa.

YD: We of course support it. We are trying to have careful optimism that maybe even if Israel won't be charged with genocide, then at least there will be provisional measures, which will lead to a ceasefire. We support it, and there was also a member of parliament who belongs to one of the Jewish-Arab parties, his name is Ofer Cassif, and he supported it publicly. Now the highest members of the Parliament are trying to kick him out, and there is an ongoing battle in that area. I've personally watched the whole thing live. We obviously are with South Africa in this matter.

TFSR: Hopefully, something will come out of it. I think it's already having some effects, just from what I can see from my geographically removed position.

YD: Yeah, at least perceptionally, it hopefully did something. There was the case in the ICJ against Israel, I think in 2004, and they ordered Israel to do some stuff—I think it was against the wall. They ordered Israel to remove the wall or something, but of course, nothing happened. That's why the optimism has to be careful.

TFSR: I like your position of careful optimism because it discounts any sort of room for recklessness. It also makes a gate between yourself and despair, which I think can be a destructive emotion to feel, though it's reasonable to feel it in doses, you know?

YD: Yeah, it was the case—I mean with despair—that month in the beginning,

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first of all, you would see everything around you falling apart, and you know people who were killed on October 7th. And now, you're stuck inbetween these two sides. Then you see Israel beginning to obliterate Gaza. You also see Israeli society becoming this ultra-fascist, warmongering beast. You can't escape all of the people that are close to you saying stuff that is honestly just horrible. You would never imagined any sane person would say these things. Not that my feelings on the case matter so much, but seeing the international support is something that gives a little optimism. Even if this genocide won't be stopped, there will be some popular pressure against Israel, which is something.

TFSR: I have that question about antisemitism. Did you not want to speak about that? Or should should we speak about that?

YD: No, I can answer it. I think that Jews in Israel don't really feel antisemitism, because we are the power here. Although I think that antisemitism is relevant in this case, because a lot of people, that we looked up to in the international leftist scene disappointed us. I don't request any Palestinian to condemn what Hamas did, but I think that being somebody who doesn't have any personal involvement in the conflict, I don't think it's fair for you to take a side in a tribal way, like saying, "This is my tribe." No, you need to take a stance for human rights and for a good life for everybody.

In that case, if you're not Palestinian and supporting Hamas, it is an extremist religious organization, especially for anarchists who didn't condemn Hamas, there's no way to spin it. Hamas is extremist, religious, oppressive. It also oppresses Palestinians. Even if you support violent resistance, or whatever, come on. More than 1,000 civilians have been killed. We should speak about violent resistance, but at this point saying that this is violent resistance, especially if you're not Palestinian, come on. We were kind of hurt and pretty disappointed to see a lot of people from the international scene, who we thought were truly with us. In the end, if white Americans don't think anything about what Hamas did, and a lot of them even hailed Hamas, it's kind of sketchy. I don't want to hurry and call it antisemitism. I'm not saying that it's necessarily that. I guess in this regard, it's what I think.

TFSR: The reason I wanted to hear about antisemitism is that it is always really difficult when the language that oppressed people use to describe their own oppression gets co-opted by state formations. How the concept of antisemitism is getting used to justify the attacks on Gaza is very damaging to the very useful concept of having a word to describe bigotry. That's why I wanted to hear what you have to say about it, and I thank you for what

you did say.

YD: I agree. It's not something new that the Israeli state co-opts this term just to use it against anything that is anti-Zionist, but it's also needed to be said that we do see a lot of stuff that is pretty blatantly antisemitic, and you do see a rise in it. But for us, it's on the internet. I need to tread carefully here because I don't want my words to be taken the wrong way. I think that what the Israeli state is doing is not helping our case against antisemitism. I think that antisemitism is terrible, and the people who are taking this stance are problematic racists. I do think that the Israeli state is not helping the Jewish people by making genocide. It does not help against anti-semitism, it pretty much worsens it.

TFSR: So getting back to refusing service, what would you say to any Israeli citizen who is considering refusing service?

YD: First of all, we are not allowed to encourage refusal, that is a punishable offense. So we at Mesarvot also don't encourage people to not enlist. We encourage people to think twice. I'll say it like that. What I have to say to people who are thinking about this is that Israel is a super militaristic place for 75, 80 years since its inception, and yet we have now seen the worst event for Israeli security since the beginning of the state. For me, it shows a very clear thing, which is that the army does not protect, and the Israeli Defense Force does not defend. The occupation and the military, which are two inseparable things, cause more harm to Israelis than they claim to mitigate.

October 7th showed it very well. Even the aftermath, now that Israel is waging a revenge war on Gaza, clearly shows that there is no military solution, because when we try to reach a military solution, a genocide happens, some would say on purpose. The army does not defend us, does not defend the Israelis, does not help anyone. If it would have helped, nothing like this would have happened. Enlisting in the military, no matter to which row, is taking the side of the army and of the state, and agreeing to this dogma of mandatory enlistment and saying, "I will enlist because I have to," even if you think you'll be the good soldier, there is no good soldier. Yes, you can do a little less harm, you can not harass a Palestinian while you are arresting him at his home, but you are still arresting him at his home.

Taking part in this machine, taking part in this concept, is in itself what drives peace away because while the army exists and while it's everywhere, while our society is so militaristic, there can't be peace, because the existence of the army as-is [exists as] a message to the Palestinians—"We are waging war on you." While the IDF exists, we won't ever reach a solution, I truly believe that. Especially now, this war serves nothing for the Israeli side. It doesn't benefit us in any way. I think that

we've reached the point where the army truly showed how useless and harmful it is. I think this concept is broken. Even if you thought so before, now it's hard to carry on thinking the same, that the Israeli Defense Forces is truly a defense force.

TFSR: Since most of our listenership is in the US, this airs terrestrially and also in podcast form, what would you say to any American Jewish folks living in the US who are not on board for a ceasefire?

YD: Who is not on a board for a cease-fire? Do you mean, that you have any listeners who are not on board?

TFSR: We may not. [Laughs] But in case this makes it into the ears of somebody via the radio waves. Generally speaking, this is a very sympathetic audience to any guests that we have.

YD: So, you're asking what my message to the Zionists is?

TFSR: Yeah, in essence.

YD: I think that putting Palestinians aside for a second, which is something very problematic to do, but you can't discuss with Zionists about Palestinian rights because they don't care. Looking at the Israeli and Jewish side, this war harms us. Again, it kind of disgusts me when there exists a discussion of pros and cons to this war that does not include the Palestinians, but being pragmatic for a second: this war does not benefit Israelis, it does not ensure security. The war of revenge is a terrible PR, and it prevents any future of peace in this region.

How will you ever be able to speak to the Palestinians again after you've murdered 30,000 of them? It's a war of demolition, and so many people see it so clearly. There's a reason why there is massive popular support for Palestinians at this time. It's so clear that this war is nothing but a genocide that, again, gives the Israelis nothing, absolutely nothing. From the beginning of the war, Hamas put an offer at the Israeli table. They said, "We offer to return all the Israeli children and women, hostages, for all of our children and women." Israel declined. Israel could have released more than 100 hostages in one deal. Why? Because Israel needed the excuse to enter Gaza and obliterate it. If Israel would have agreed to this deal, it wouldn't have had the legitimacy to enter Gaza. Israel refused because this government is a bloodthirsty government full of racists and fascists, and the army is not very different. It's just so clear, that this war was never meant to help us or to save us. It's clear what the agenda is. Looking onward, as I said, it just prevents any future of possible peace. And, yeah, I think it's terrible that....there are a lot of Israelis

who are for a ceasefire, but the fact that there are a lot of Israelis and just generally Zionists who think that this war somehow helps them, for me, it's hard not to look at it as a lost cause.

TFSR: I want to qualify this question a little bit with two statements. I think that sometimes solutions-oriented questions are a bit self-defeating because they're putting the cart before the horse. Also bearing in mind that the ultimate word on this question needs to come from Palestinians, the question is, do you have any wish or wishes for any sort of paths out of this current situation?

YD: Oh, wishes, I have a ton, but I'm truly not optimistic, seeing the state of Israeli society, seeing the mentality here, seeing the situation in the West Bank, which is worsening every day. The immediate wish is for a ceasefire, but it kind of reminds me of the discussion in Israel about the day after. Israel should not have a say in the day after for Gaza. We had a say in the day after for Gaza for so long and look what we have done. I don't know.

I'm struggling to see beyond trying to focus on the here and now because the future isn't promising at all. Again, the immediate wish is to stop this hell. For the future—that the occupation will end. Maybe if the case from the ICJ would move to the criminal court, that would also be nice, and seeing true reconciliation. But that includes peace, that includes the dissolution of the State of Israel, the end of Zionism, and the right to return for Palestinians, all of this. It's so far right now, and everyday every bomb that Israel drops is driving all of this even further. There isn't a lot to hold on to in this state, especially seeing what's going on. I guess we will wait and see, and we'll try to do what we can in the meantime.

TFSR: In the chance that this interview makes it into Gaza or the occupied Palestinian territories, do you have any words or a message for folk living there right now? It's OK if you don't.

YD: That's the biggest and scariest question. Some will say surprisingly, but in the West Bank, although the situation there is much worse, there is still radical Israeli and Palestinian cooperation. It has existed for a lot of years and continues to exist. But in Gaza, the thing that made the situation so bad and got us to this point is the social isolation. No Israeli born in the last 20 years knows anybody from Gaza, and no Gazan knows any Israeli.

The plain fact that you see is when people meet when anti-Zionist Israelis and Palestinians meet, there is cooperation. I have a lot of friends from my social circle who had friends in Gaza until very recently. And then some of them were

killed in the bombings, of course. When people meet and talk, it does enable cooperation. In those moments it's where the hope is. It's in these moments when you look to and say, "Oh, if only all of Israel would have seen this, then they wouldn't think that all of the Palestinians want to kill us," and they would become a little more sensible in all of this. If this in some way reaches Gaza, I hope they know that even in Israel, within Israeli society, people are trying to amplify their voices. I do need to add that I think that we're just doing what we need to do. Resisting this terrible thing, it's the basics. At the end of the day, it's hard to tell anything to people who have sacrificed so much.

TFSR: What can listeners do to support you and anyone else who is seeking to refuse military service? How can folk learn more about Mesarvot?

YD: We are gathering donations right now. If you go to our socials, you can find the link there and support us. Just follow us and amplify our voices, because it does help that the world hears that Israelis are refusing to cooperate with this thing. Again, I truly believe that we need to show an alternative. We can't only resist the current situation, we also need to show an alternative, and we're trying to show it. Supporting us is great, but in general, just resisting the war. If you have the ability then coming to Palestine, to the West Bank, being in protective presence. It's also a possibility, and people do it, and it's probably the most efficient way people can join and help.



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